



Moving Forward To Reduce Flood Vulnerability in the Delaware River Basin

The Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC) is one of many organizations working to achieve flood loss reduction throughout the basin. We recognize that flood vulnerability remains a chronic problem along the Delaware River and its tributaries. We also understand that floodplain residents are faced with difficult choices and limited options primarily due to the lack of funding to remedy the problem.

The DRBC's experience is that the approach to dealing with flood losses has shifted away from constructing new dams and levees to local measures such as property acquisition, flood proofing, floodplain regulation, and stormwater management. The major reasons for this shift are:

- lack of sufficient federal funding;
- local cost-sharing requirements needed to secure federal money;
- the ecologic and recreational value of special features, such as scenic river corridors; and
- the increasing view by many water resources professionals that floodplains perform an important natural function and should be managed as a resource rather than be filled, diked or dammed.

These factors have combined to drastically change the Water Resources Plan for the Delaware Basin from the structurally oriented plan it was in 1962, featuring Tocks Island Dam as its centerpiece, to the more ecologically balanced plan of today. This plan was developed through consensus of a broad range of water resource interests and can be viewed on the DRBC web site at www.nj.gov/drbc/basinplan.htm.

While additional large structural measures to reduce flooding could be physically effective, their funding and construction would require much stronger public and political support in the Delaware River Basin, along with major funding contributions from state or local governments. The funding necessary to perform even basic feasibility studies of alternatives is scarce. Following the April 2005 flood, the DRBC has been recommending that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 1984 Delaware Basin Study be updated. The 1984 report screened and eliminated all of the large structural measures considered at that time, but did recommend some local non-structural measures. An update might allow reconsideration of all types of projects. However, given the scenic river designation of the Delaware and continuing funding issues, it appears unlikely that any new large-scale structural project can be counted on to reduce future flood levels on the Delaware.

In the absence of any new large-scale structural projects, management of existing water supply facilities to assist in mitigating flood peaks is supported by the DRBC, so long as it does not conflict with the water supply use of the facility.

The 1961 compact creating the DRBC gave the agency broad powers to manage water resources in the basin. However, these powers were limited in matters related to the 1954 U.S. Supreme

Court Decree which apportioned the waters of the basin between the New York City and the down basin states. The compact specifies that the commission may not adopt modifications to the decree formula without the unanimous agreement of the five decree parties (New York State, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and New York City). Although the DRBC does not have the authority to unilaterally require storage limits or voids in the three New York City reservoirs (Cannonsville, Pepacton, and Neversink), we do provide important technical support and administrative services to the decree parties in their evaluation of potential spill reduction programs.

The DRBC commends the five decree parties for taking action in November 2005 to provide a snowpack-based void in the Pepacton and Neversink reservoirs, and supports implementation of that program to the maximum extent possible without adversely affecting water supply to the city or downstream dry weather releases.

After the April 2005 flood, DRBC staff provided a series of ten recommendations which we believe should be implemented to reduce flood damage in the basin. Foremost among these is a recommendation for all basin communities to prepare and adopt hazard mitigation plans to identify their highest priority projects for future flood mitigation funds. While these funds continue to be limited, the plans are required for communities to be eligible for financial assistance under the federal Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. The ten recommendations can be viewed at www.nj.gov/drbc/Flood_Website/10ptsJuly2005.pdf.

The risk of flooding is always present, but the damage occurs only during sudden, sometimes catastrophic, events. The nature of flooding has contributed to the difficulty in securing a steady stream of funds to address it. Even the DRBC has had to deal with the loss of federal funding support of its annual operating budget, which has limited the agency's flood loss reduction efforts. It is only through a re-prioritization of federal funds that the money will be adequate to seriously move forward with solutions – regardless of the measures employed. We encourage any citizen, or organized group of citizens, to raise this funding issue with federal and state legislators.

The DRBC will continue to work with representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state emergency management offices, the Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), the National Weather Service, and other agencies/organizations to raise flood awareness, improve flood warning programs, seek additional funds directed at flood mitigation planning, and reduce overall flood risk throughout the basin. We invite you to visit our web site at www.drbc.net which offers a lot of information about flood warning and other flood-related programs.

Carol R. Collier
Executive Director
Delaware River Basin Commission

May 2006